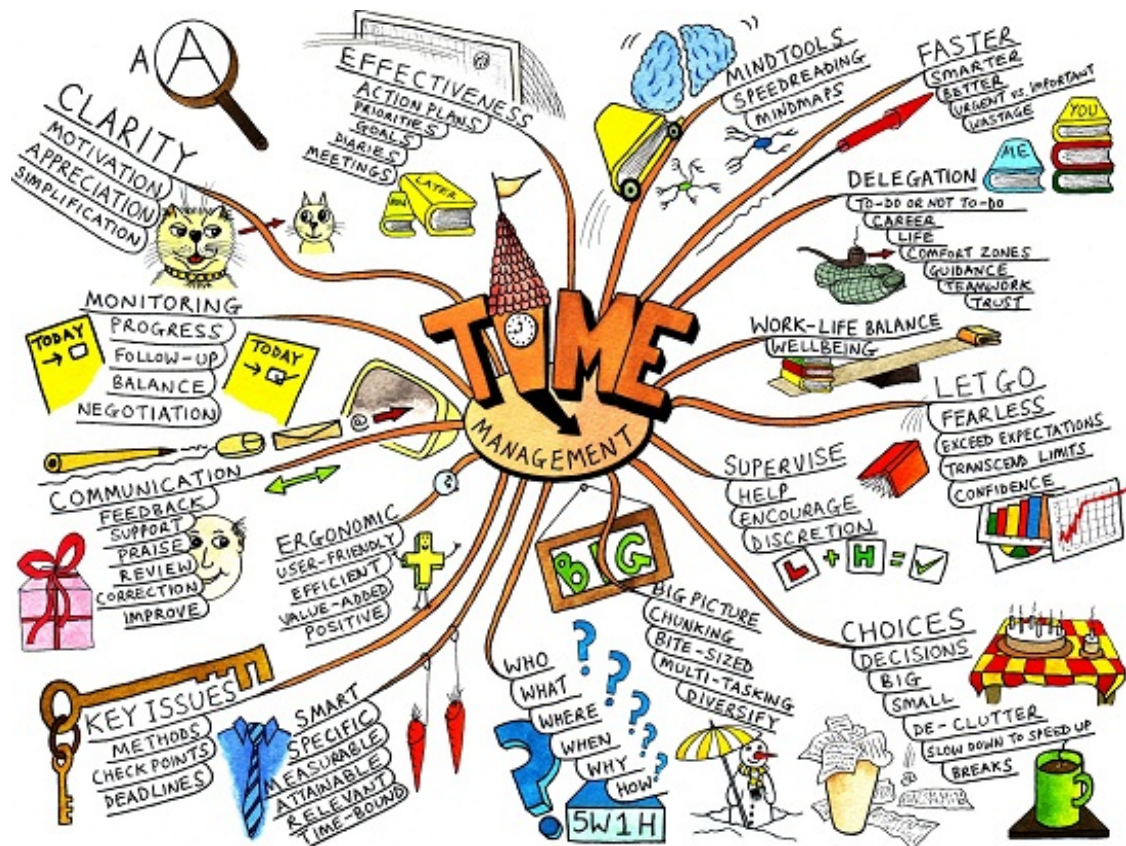


A Conspectus of Tony Buzan's "Use Your Head"



by Dominic Tweedie

Tony Buzan's book, "Use Your Head", does not deal with the social aspect of learning. For that I recommend Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", where teaching and learning are shown to work best as a dialogue between "intentional" teacher-learners and learner-teachers.

"Use Your Head" is addressed to the individual student who needs to learn how to learn. It is a "How-To" book on learning. Buzan's starting point is that most people go through many years of schooling without at any stage being taught how to learn. He thinks that we would all get along much better if we treated learning itself as a piece of work that involves definite skills.

The main skills he tries to put across are three: Reading, Remembering, and Note-Making. But first he devotes a chapter (called "Your Mind is Better Than You Think") to proving that everybody's mind is easily capable of performing any of the tasks it may be required to face. This is very encouraging.

Later in the book Buzan proves that the mind does not normally get worse as we grow older. It generally gets better. So it is wrong to believe that it is harder for older people to learn than it is for younger ones. This is also highly encouraging.

Reading

The eyes have to pause to take in the printed material. Therefore the eyes stop and start repeatedly as you read. Slow readers also “back-skip”, in other words they re-read the same word more than once.

Reading will be much faster if the jumps are longer and if more is taken in each time the eyes stop. This means taking in several words at a time. Buzan says that this is not only possible but also easier, and results in less fatigue and better understanding.

To avoid “back-skipping” and to build the habit of making bigger jumps, Buzan recommends that readers lead the eyes with a finger or other pointer; and that readers practise taking in more words at each stop (called a “fixation”). Here are some quotes from the book:

“If eyes moved over print in the smooth manner . . . they would be able to take in nothing, because the eye can see things clearly only when it can ‘hold them still’. If an object is still, the eye must be still in order to see it . . .

“Relating all this to reading, it is obvious that if the eyes are going to take in words, and if the words are still, the eyes will have to pause on each word before moving on. Rather than moving in smooth lines . . . the eyes in fact move in a series of stops and quick jumps.

“The jumps themselves are so quick as to take almost no time, but the fixations can take anywhere from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ seconds. A person who normally reads one word at a time – and who skips back over words and letters – is forced, by the simple mathematics of his eye movements, into reading speeds which are often well below 100 wpm (words per minute) and which mean that he will not be able to understand much of what he reads, nor be able to read much.

“It might seem at first glance that the slow reader is doomed, but the problem can be solved, and in more than one way:

1. Skipping back over words can be eliminated, as 90 per cent of back-skipping is based on fear and is unnecessary for understanding . . .

2. The time for each fixation can be reduced to approach the $\frac{1}{4}$ second minimum – the reader need not fear that this is too short a time, for his eye is able to register as many as five words in one-hundredth of a second.
3. The size of the fixation can be expanded to take in as many as three to five words at a time.

“This solution might at first seem impossible if it is true that the mind deals with one word at a time. In fact the mind can equally well fixate on *groups* of words, which is better in nearly all ways: When we read a sentence we do not read it for the individual meaning of each word, but for the meaning of the phrases in which the words are contained.

“The slower reader has to do more mental work than the faster reader because he has to add the meaning of each word to the meaning of each following word.

“Another advantage for the faster reader is that his eyes will be doing less physical work on each page. Rather than having as many as 500 fixations tightly focused per page as does the slow reader, he will have as few as 100 fixations per page, each one of which is less muscularly fatiguing.

“Yet another advantage is that the rhythm and flow of the faster reader will carry him comfortably through the meaning, whereas the slow reader, because of his stopping and starting, jerky approach, will be far more likely to become bored, to lose concentration, to mentally drift away and to lose the meaning of what he is reading.

“It can be seen from this that a number of the commonly held beliefs about faster readers are false:

1. *Words must be read one at a time: **Wrong.*** Because of our ability to fixate and because we read for meaning rather than for single words.
2. *Reading faster than 500 wpm is impossible: **Wrong.*** Because the fact that we can take in as many as six words per fixation and the fact that we can make four fixations a second means that speeds of 1000 wpm are perfectly feasible.
3. *The faster reader is not able to appreciate: **Wrong.*** Because the faster reader will be understanding more of the meaning of what he reads, will be concentrating on the material more, and will have considerably more time to go back over areas of special interest and importance to him.

4. *Higher speeds give lower concentration: **Wrong.*** Because the faster we go the more impetus we gather and the more we concentrate.
5. *Average reading speeds are natural and therefore the best: **Wrong.*** Because average reading speeds are not natural. They are speeds produced by an incomplete initial training in reading, combined with an inadequate knowledge of how the eye and the brain work at the various speeds possible.

“Apart from the general advice given above, some readers may be able to benefit from the following . . .

1. **Visual aid techniques:** When children learn how to read they often point their finger to the words they are reading. We have traditionally regarded this as a fault and have told them to take their fingers off the page. It is now realised that it is we and not the children who are at fault. Instead of insisting that they remove their fingers we should ask them to move their fingers faster . . .
2. **Expanded focus:** In conjunction with visual aid techniques, the reader can practise taking in more than one line at a time. This is certainly not physically impossible and is especially useful on light material or for overviewing and previewing. It will also improve normal reading speeds. It is very important always to use a visual guide during this kind of reading, as without it the eye will tend to wander . . .
3. **High speed perception:** This exercise involves turning pages as fast as possible attempting to see as many words per page as possible. This form of training will increase the ability to take in large groups of words per fixation, will be applicable to overviewing and previewing techniques, and will condition the mind to much more rapid and efficient general reading practices . . .
4. **Motivational practice:** Most reading is done at a relaxed and almost lackadaisical pace, a fact of which many speed reading courses have taken advantage. Students are given various exercises and tasks, and it is suggested to them that after each exercise their speed will increase by 10-20 wpm. And so it does, often by as much as 100 per cent over the duration of the lessons. The increase, however, is often due not to the exercises, but to the fact that the student’s motivation has been eked out bit by bit during the course . . .
5. **Metronome training:** A metronome, which is usually used for keeping musical rhythm, can be most useful for both reading and high speed reading practices. If you set it at a reasonable pace, each beat can indicate a single sweep for your

visual aid. In this way a steady and smooth rhythm can be maintained and the usual slowdown that occurs after a little while can be avoided. Once the most comfortable rhythm has been found, your reading speed can be improved by occasionally adding an extra beat per minute. The metronome can also be used to pace the high speed perception exercises, starting at slower rates and accelerating to exceptionally fast rates, "looking" at one page per beat.

Remembering

Tony Buzan looks at the learning period, and after.

During the learning period (which could be reading, or a class, lecture, or workshop) he says that students remember more from the beginning and the end, with a dip in the middle. Therefore, he says, breaks should be taken every 20-40 minutes (making more 'beginnings' and 'ends').

After the learning period, according to the research quoted by Buzan, knowledge tails off to almost nothing unless there is systematic review, or revision. It does not have to be extended on each occasion. Little and often is the best way.

Just these simple techniques of taking breaks and doing frequent small reviews will increase your retention of learnt material. Buzan also describes special memory techniques. These all seem to rely on associating things together in imaginative ways, an idea which Buzan picks up again in his note-making section.

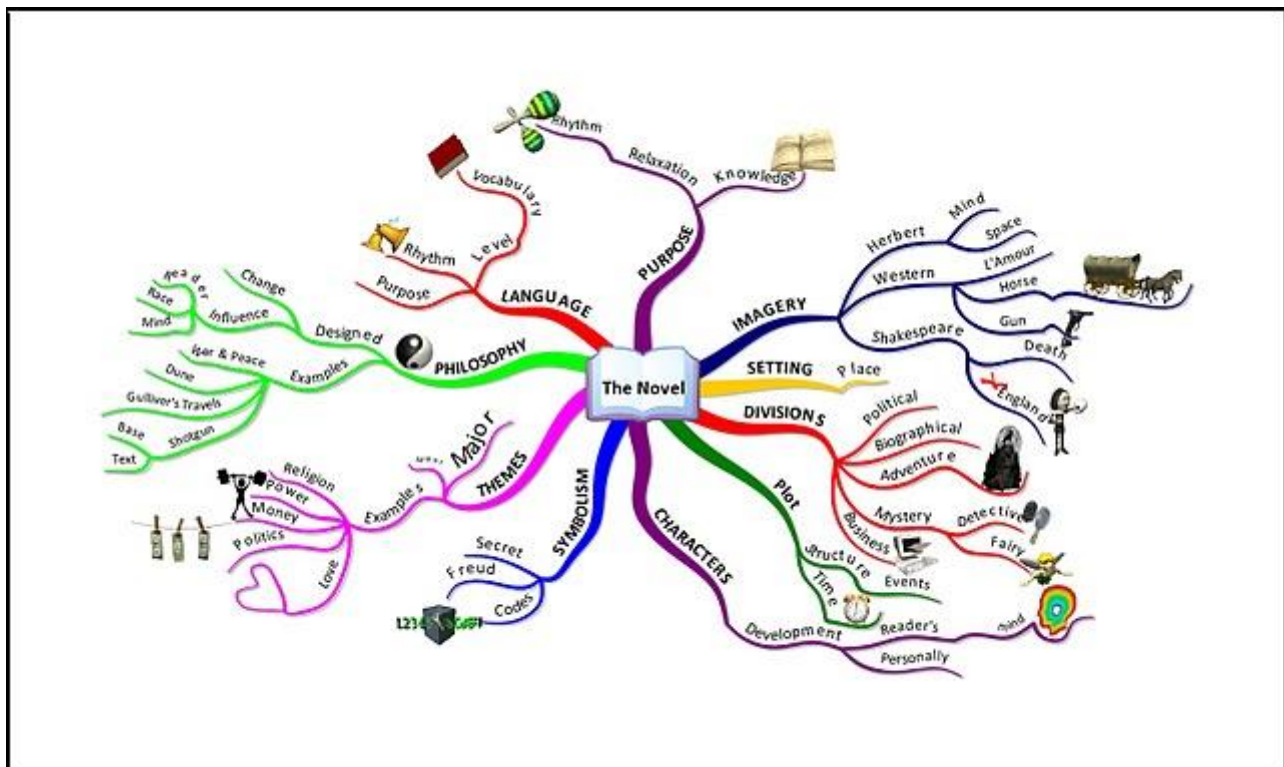
Note-Making

I have been using Tony Buzan's famous '**mind-map**' technique for twenty years.

As I see it now it is not so just a way of making notes of lectures or of a book that one has read. It is that also, but it is even more useful as a way of organising material for output.

For example, I used to use it for working out how I was going to write an essay. Nowadays I use it for preparing a report, or writing an article. And if I have to explain something, I often use a 'mind-map', done in colours on a white-board, sometimes made up there and then with the help of the audience. It always seems to work.

I will describe the mind-map technique by reproducing, below, the description provided by Sylvia Justice-Mills, who was the first person to explain this technique to me. It was one afternoon in the early nineteen-eighties at the Polytechnic of Central London, in the Students' Union building . . .



Buzan argues that conventional written students' notes are linear, whereas the material is always 'multi-ordinate', meaning that each word or concept connects in many possible ways, which cannot be shown in a list or serial form.

This straight away gives the biggest difference between traditional notes and mind-mapping. Instead of starting at the top left-hand corner of the page, the mind-mapper starts in the middle.

A mind-map is always a one-page thing. It is the 'big picture'. It is the forest, not just the trees. It is a 'helicopter view' of the topic. In Marxist terms, it is 'concrete'. It should be dialectical. It is 'organic', and not eclectic.

Sylvia Justice-Mills's pink A4 stencilled sheet, which I still have, is headed "Effective Study Management in F.E. and H.E.. Note Making. A Method to Aid Reviews Overviews Relationships Organisation Memory. (Producing an Overview of Major Concepts and Relationships Between Them).

Then it gives the instructions for a mind-map:

1. Survey the materials to be studied, find the major topics.
2. Use paper **turned sideways**, any good sized paper will do, A4 is suitable.
3. **Put the title of the major topic in the centre of the page.**

4. Enclose this title in some shape, but a picture is best.
5. Survey the material again to find the main sub-topics.
6. Write a title for each sub-topic on a line which radiates out from the centre topic.
7. Survey again to find any subsidiary topics still not covered.
8. Put branching lines from the sub-topic line to represent the subsidiary topics.
9. Give a title to each of these last drawn lines.
10. At the end of the final lines write in any details that are essential to the topic.

Then it lists 'Additional Aids', as follows:

11. Use abbreviations as often as possible, develop your own personal shorthand.
12. Colour-code branch lines to highlight hierarchies.
13. Outline each sub-topic with a different colour. This defines its outlines, limits, contents and close relationships.
14. Use coloured arrows to link parts of your notes to show relationships.
15. Pictures aid memory, so devise them for yourself.

Sylvia Justice-Mills then recommended 'Use Your Head', by Tony Buzan, which I immediately went out and bought. When I returned (ten years later) to South Africa I found that Buzan was well known here and his books were available in CNA. The newer editions are bigger, and there are other books in a series. But, as with the Marxist classics, when the circumstances have not changed, the original works are still as modern as they were when they were written.

The Buzan Organic Study Method

My 1982 edition of "Use Your Head", a small paperback published by the BBC, concludes with a section called "The Buzan organic study method".

Before the method is described, Buzan has words to say about the fear of books and study, which causes so much waste and distress. The solution is to provide a clear way through for people who probably have never learnt how to learn, and in that way remove a lot of their fear.

In my opinion, this can help us to resolve some problems in our Study Group. If we are all learning in the same rational way, none of us should fear any "difficult" books. (The other side of this question, the social side, is even more critical. For guidance on that side we need to look at Paulo Freire's pedagogy, which will guide us also in our relations with the wider masses - "the public").

The following are excerpts from the final part of "Use Your Head":

The Browse

“Before doing anything else, it is *essential* to ‘browse’ or look through the entire book or periodical you are about to study. The browse should be done in the way you would look through a book you were considering buying in a bookshop, or in the way you would look through a book you were considering taking out from the library. In other words casually, but rather rapidly, flipping through the pages, getting the general ‘feel’ of the book, observing the organisation and structure, the level of difficulty, the proportion of diagrams and illustrations to text, the location of any results, summaries and conclusions sections etc. . . .

Time and Amount

“The first thing to do when sitting down to study a text book is to decide on the period of time to be devoted to it. Having done this, decide what amount to cover in the time allocated . . .

“In study, making a decision about Time and Amount gives us immediate chronological and volume terrain, as well as an end point or goal. This has the added advantage of enabling the proper linkages to be made rather than encouraging a wandering off in more disconnected ways . . .

“A further advantage of making these decisions at the outset is that the underlying fear of the unknown is avoided. If a large study book is plunged into with no planning, the reader will be continually oppressed by the number of pages he eventually has to complete. Each time he sits down he will be aware that he still has a ‘few hundred pages to go’ and will be studying with this as a constant and real background threat. If, on the other hand, he has selected a reasonable number of pages for the time he is going to study, he will be reading with the knowledge that the task he has set himself is easy and can certainly be completed . . .

“There are still further reasons for making these time and amount decisions which are concerned with the distribution of the reader’s effort as time goes on.

“Imagine that you have decided to study for two hours and that the first half-an-hour has been pretty difficult, although you have been making some progress. At this point in time you find that understanding begins to improve and that your progress seems to be getting better and faster.

“Would you pat yourself on the back and take a break?

“Or would you decide to keep the new and better rhythm going by studying for a while until you began to lose the new impetus?

“Ninety per cent of people asked those questions would carry on. Of those who would take a break, only a few would recommend the same thing to anyone else!

“And yet surprisingly the best answer *is* to take a break. The reason for this can be seen by referring back to the discussion in the chapter on Memory (see above – DT) and the amount that is recalled from a period of learning. Despite the fact that understanding may be continually high, the recall of that understanding will be getting worse if the mind is not given a break . . . It is essential that any time period for studying be broken down into 20-40 minute sections with small rests in between.

“To assist even further, do a quick review of what you have read and a preview of what you are about to read at the beginning and end of each study period . . .

Noting of Knowledge on the Subject

“Having decided on the amounts to be covered, next jot down as much as you know on the subject as fast as you can. (2-5 minutes). Notes should be in key words and creative pattern form (mind map).

Asking questions – Defining Goals

Having established the current state of knowledge on the subject, it is advisable to decide what you want from the book. This involves defining the questions you want answered during the reading. The questions should be asked in the context of goals aimed for and should, like the noting of knowledge, be done in key word and mind map form . . . (2-5 minutes).

Study Overview

“One of the interesting facts about people using study books is that most, when given a new text, start reading on page one. It is *not* advisable to start reading a new study text on the first page . . .

“What is essential in a reasonable approach to study texts, especially difficult ones, is to get a good idea of what’s in them before plodding on into a learning catastrophe . . .

“What this means in a study context is that you should scour the book for all the material not included in the regular body of the print, using your visual guide as you do so. Areas of the book to be covered in your overview include:

results	tables	subheadings
summaries	table of contents	dates
conclusions	marginal notes	italics
indents	illustrations	graphs
glossaries	capitalised words	footnotes
back cover	photographs	statistics
index	bibliography	acknowledgements

Preview

“During the preview, concentration should be directed to the beginnings and ends of paragraphs, sections, chapters, and even whole texts, because information tends to be concentrated at the beginnings and ends of written material.

“If you are studying a short academic paper or a complex study book, the Summary Results and Conclusion sections should always be read first. These sections often include exactly those essences of information that you are searching for, enabling you to grasp that essence without having to wade through a lot of time-wasting material.

“The value of this section cannot be overemphasised. A case in point is that of a student taught at Oxford who had spent four months struggling through a 500-page tome on psychology. By the time he had reached page 450 he was beginning to despair because the amount of information he was ‘holding on to’ as he tried to get to the end was becoming too much – was literally beginning to drown in the information just before reaching his goal.

“It transpired that he had been reading straight through the book, and even though he was nearing the end, did not know what the last chapter was about. It was a complete summary of the book! He read the section and estimated that had he done so at the beginning he would have saved himself approximately 70 hours in reading time, 20 hours in note-taking time, and a few hundred hours of worrying.

(There are plenty of examples of this kind of thing in our CD. One is “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, by Engels. It is a difficult book to read from the front, to be sure, with a whole lot of stuff about the “gens” and the “phratry” and so on. But if you go straight to Chapter Nine, called “Barbarism and

Civilisation”, you find in about seven pages of A4, a clear summary of the whole book – in a single sweep, the whole of human pre-history and history. When you go back to the other chapters, you find the gens/phratry stuff takes its place without difficulty.

Another example is Fanon’s “Wretched of the Earth”, in which the short section of “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” is substantially the whole book. Likewise Freire’s “Pedagogy”. It is repetitive and becomes prolix and obscure. But ninety per cent of the book’s powerful message can be got from the sixteen-page Chapter Two. And in Clausewitz’s book on war, Chapter One is deliberately given as a summary of the whole work. In such cases it is just a matter of finding the main material, which might be at the end, or in the middle, or at the beginning.

Even in the case of “Use Your Head”, which is a small paperback, I think I have managed to get most of it into these few pages, and not weakened it in the process, but rather strengthened it. Brevity is the soul of wit.

The fact is that books are commodities like everything else in bourgeois society. To get published, authors are compelled to pad up their writing to the required length to make a saleable book. Compare them with Lenin, whose works are nearly all brief, but are all the more powerful as a result.

Difficult Sections

“Moving on from a difficult area releases the tension and mental floundering that often accompanies the traditional approach.

“‘Jumping over’ a stumbling block usually enables the reader to go back to it later on with more information from the ‘other side’. The block itself is seldom essential for the understanding of that which follows it.

Review

“In this stage simply fill in all those areas as yet incomplete, and reconsider those sections marked as noteworthy. In most cases it will be found that not much more than 70 per cent of that initially considered relevant will finally be used. Then complete your mind map notes.”

Conclusion – my own

We have to read for study. But later on we have to read in situations of even greater time-constraint, for work, for business, possibly union business, and for politics.

One way of taking Tony Buzan's lesson is to say that you must get what you need out of a book in the time available. If the book is 250 pages long and you only have ten minutes, then you must get the "essence", as Buzan calls it out of that book in the ten minutes. You will do so, and what is more, your learning of that book will be of the highest quality.

You do this by all the means describes above. Mostly it seems that you are breaking the rules, and going against your earliest learning, when you first learnt how to read.

But it works. Anyway, you have no other way to go. You do not have time in your life to plod through the works of Marxism-Leninism, or any other field of study including your own livelihood, in the old way. You have to crunch them books in quick-time. The good news is, and I can vouch for it, that crunch learning, Buzan-style, is actually the best learning.

Dominic Tweedie,

January 2004

Updated January 2013

Tony Buzan's web site is at: <http://www.tonybuzan.com/>

Course: Education

23014, Tony Buzan, Use Your Head (Conspectus by D Tweedie), 1974

4186 words